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The Psychology of Global Warming: Why YOU Haven't Acted Yet

By Annie Hauser | Published: Oct 2, 2013, 2:18 PM EDT | weather.com

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The planet is getting warmer, climate systems are changing and **it's "extremely likely" this warming is man-made**, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's latest report, released at the end of September.

The new report uses the strongest words yet on the issue — and **some climate experts still believe the IPCC estimates are "conservative."**

(MORE: How Climate Change is Already Hurting Your Heart)

And yet, individuals aren't doing much to limit or lessen their carbon footprint. We're actually doing so little, psychologists have been studying why for *decades*.

"When there's a new issue to think about, in this case, climate change, people form their attitudes toward the new issue based on their underlying values," psychologist Paul Stern, PhD, of the **National Academies of Science**, told Weather.com. Dr. Stern has researched human reactions to global changes, including climate change, for decades. He contributed to **a comprehensive report on the psychological challenges surrounding climate change**, which the American Psychological Association published in 2009.

Some people's value systems prioritize the collective good. Others prioritize their individual lives, making action around a vague and distant threat that's largely perceived as a merely academic debate psychologically unlikely.

Some people don't act because they feel they can't control the outcome, or the issue provokes too much anxiety, so they choose to look the other way — just temporarily, they believe.

(MORE: Eye-Opening Effects of Climate Change)

Cass Sunstein, President Obama's former regulatory chief, wrote last month in an op-ed for Bloomberg that **people don't view risk associated with climate change the same as a more tangible threat**. "An act of terrorism, for example, is likely to be both available and salient, and hence makes people fear that another such event will occur (whether it is likely to or not)," he wrote. "By contrast,

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climate change is difficult to associate with any particular tragedy or disaster.”

Some scientists believe manmade **climate change made events such as Hurricane Sandy or the recent Colorado wildfires and flooding either worse or more likely than they would have been** otherwise, but it's difficult to say by how much. There's still a great deal of uncertainty among the scientific community, **Dr. Jeff Masters** of Weather Underground told Weather.com last week.

To nonscientists, uncertainties may be misinterpreted. “Well-meant efforts by climate-change experts to characterize what they do and do not know [can lead] to systematic underestimation of risk,” the 2009 APA report noted. “Scientists are left with the problem of how to present the risk honestly while not promoting misguided optimism and justifying inaction.”

Plus, with rare events, such as the Colorado flood, it's hard for the average person to identify risk based on their personal experiences. “If a 100-year flood becomes a 30-year flood, what does that mean about when the next one is going to come around?” Dr. Stern said. “The issue is about the difficulty of understanding rare events.”

The owners of Sylvan Dale Guest Ranch outside of Loveland, Colo., are the perfect examples of this principle, ranch owner David Jessup explained to NPR after the storm. A flood destroyed the ranch in the '70s; they rebuilt after the last flood in a way that they thought storm-proofed their property. But when September's flood hit — it was twice as large as the 1976 surge — their property was destroyed, and they have no flood insurance to cover it because they thought they were safe.

Climate-change deniers also majorly contribute to mass climate inaction, Dr. Stern said. “They say it's nothing to worry about; it's not caused by human activity, so you don't have a responsibility to do anything or care,” Dr. Stern said. “This attitude is particularly strong in the U.S. and somewhat in the U.K., but in other countries it's rare — almost nonexistent.”

Life-changing action is also difficult. “When people decide they ought to do something, there's a question of what to do and whether the information that's out there is trustworthy,” Dr. Stern said. Evaluating the costs and benefits of installing solar panels in your home is time consuming and difficult, and it's hard to know whether you can trust contractors and energy providers to create the most benefit, he explained. It took Dr. Stern six years to install solar panels on his own home, for example, even when he bought the home thinking he'd immediately do so.

When individuals take small actions — they recycle or carry reusable grocery bags — they think that they've done their part, Dr. Stern said, and they mentally cross it off their to-do list. “People need help prioritizing the steps they can take to lessen their carbon footprint,” he added. (Dr. Stern and a colleague actually published a shortlist on **the most effective actions people and businesses can take against climate change** in *Environment Magazine* in 2009.)

So what would make us collectively change our ways, and fight manmade climate change on an individual level? From a psychological perspective, a little bit of everything must occur, Stern said: More **severe weather** events with human impacts, fewer climate deniers, easy, accessible guides to lessening our carbon footprint and a renewed sociological focus on acting for the collective good.

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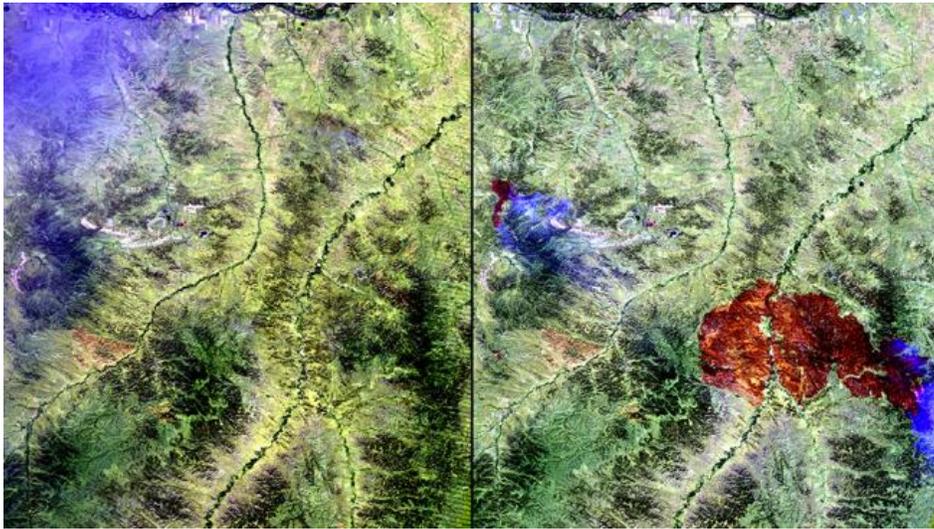
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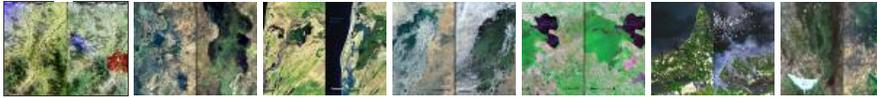


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The Ash Creek Fire seen here is one of some 27,000 fires which have destroyed nearly 2 million acres of the western U.S. since the start of 2012. Extremely dry conditions, stiff winds, unusually warm weather, and trees killed by outbreaks of pine bark beetles have provided ideal conditions for the blazes. (Credit: NASA)



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This fun (some may say BIZARRE) project is designed to inspire more climate awareness: <http://fangedwilds.org/>and we'd love any feedback!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · October 16 at 5:49pm

**Donald Klipstein** · Drexel University

The link mentioning climate change hurting my heart mentions many health issues, but I did not see any mention of cardiac health issues.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · October 6 at 9:41pm

**Donald Klipstein** · Drexel University

Have a look at the temperature trend in any of the major long term global surface temperature trends, but especially HadCRUT3 because that has better resemblance to the satellite-based indices of lower troposphere temperature trend than the others including HadCRUT4. A periodic component is obvious, accounting for almost half the warming from the early 1970s to the 2005 peak. Global temperature is now about where it was in 2001. <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/hadobs/hadcrut3/diagnostics/global/nh+sh/>

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · October 6 at 9:14pm

**Dave Leaton** · Top Commenter · Kirksville, Missouri

DK - Dunning-Kruger? Donald, you persist with the proposition that Had3 is better because it more closely resembles lower troposphere, even after I explained that the lower troposphere is naturally cooler than the surface. Basically, you're saying that you like to use Had3 because it runs cooler.

At any rate, I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to respond to such silliness, even if you're never going to respond back.

<http://www.woodfortrees.org/plot/hadcrut3vgl/from:1974/mean:12/plot/hadcrut3vgl/from:1974/trend/plot/hadcrut4gl/from:1974/mean:12/plot/hadcrut4gl/from:1974/trend/plot/gistemp/from:1974/mean:12/plot/gistemp/from:1974/trend/plot/rss/from:1979/mean:12/plot/rss/from:1979/trend>

As you see, you're actually wrong even if your method wasn't comparing apples and oranges. And, as you can see, the long-term trends for all the major surface temp analyses are pretty much in line.

Yes, there are periodic components -- ENSO, solar 11-year, PDO, etc., but when those signals are removed, a strong positive long-term trend is left over: <http://contextearth.com/2013/10/04/climate-variability-and-inferring-global-warming/>

<http://tamino.wordpress.com/2011/12/06/the-real-global-warming-signal/>

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · October 7 at 8:30am

**Matthew W Menefee** · Top Commenter · Keller Graduate School of Management

It's lie. They've already shown that the ice sheets have grown over 60% in the past year. It's a cycle, and now we're cooling.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · October 4 at 6:13pm

**Dave Leaton** · Top Commenter · Kirksville, Missouri

David Rose has already retracted the 60% claim. I challenge you to do the math and make it come out to 60%. Taking 2012 and 2013 together, they combine to barely move the strongly-negative 10-year linear trend. And for area, in the last 34 years, fifteen summer minimums have exceeded the previous year's minimum, yet the overall trend is strongly negative.

It's a cycle? Ok, so what physical mechanisms is this cycle based on? It's not the solar variation (flat or falling for fifty years), and no oscillation is even close to being strong enough to cause the size of the trend we've had. So what is it? Or is this Argumentum Ad Itsjustgottabe?

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**Evan Jones** · Top Commenter · Information Security Officer at Department of Veterans Affairs

Global warming causes global cooling. Or is it the other way around.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · October 4 at 10:56am

**Dave Leaton** · Top Commenter · Kirksville, Missouri

It hasn't caused it yet, so I'm wondering about the basis of your belief.

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